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Kali Herbst Minino
Seattle University

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Seattle Bookstore Community Pivots for Independent Bookstore Day

Kali Herbst Minino, Staff Reporter

Before the pandemic, book lovers in the Seattle area would plan, wake up early and scramble to get to every bookstore on their list, seeking an adventure, a promising reward or a bit of both during annual Independent Bookstore Day, which lasts from April 24 to May 3.

Independent Bookstore Day is a national celebration, and bookstores all over the country celebrate it in their own unique ways. It is especially distinct in Seattle, as Christy McDanold, the owner of Secret Garden Books, explained.

“Seattle’s very uniquely positioned because we have enough independent bookstores and it’s a challenge enough to get to all of us in one day. I don’t think there’s any other community around the country that’s been able to launch the passport thing that we’ve been able to do,” McDanold said.

Last year Independent Bookstore Day was not held due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but this year, the celebration of indie bookstores is back, albeit a little different.

Traditionally the Seattle celebration would challenge visitors to make their way to all the participating bookstores on the last Saturday in April. Anyone who got their bookstore passport stamped at all the locations would get a 25% discount at all the bookstores for the next year.

This year, the challenge is to purchase something at any price point from ten bookstores in ten days, and the prize is a special tote bag from the event. The change in format was made in response to COVID-19, as Independent Bookstore Day did not want to encourage crowded stores. There is a printable passport on their website, including a list of the participating bookstores and information on which ones offer online purchasing. Participating involves keeping the receipts from the bookstores, then turning them in either online or through the mail.

Some of the bookstores are holding individual events outside of the passport challenge. Annie Carl, the owner of the Neverending Bookshop, held a selfie caption contest on the day of the celebration. The winner received the traditional 25% discount for her store.

At Madison Books, general manager James Crossley explained that the bookstore would hold a pop-up shop with Flour Lane Bake Shop. Secret Garden Books put out advanced copies of books in exchange for a donation, and the donations will go to purchasing books for communities that need them. In the past, they have sent books in Spanish to families at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Overall, there is an enthusiasm about the event from bookstore owners. Phil Bevis, founder of Arundel Books, recalled his past joy from the event.



“It’s this sense of excitement, like something is really happening. There are thousands of folks running around to independent bookstores. Some of them rent buses, like tour buses. Some of them plan out routes so they can ride around. It’s just this super positive, community experience. It’s the most fun I’ve ever had in my 40 years of this business, the absolute high point of the year,” Bevis said.

One of the highlights of the event is the community it fosters among bookstore owners and their patrons. Crossley spoke to that camaraderie.

“It’s one of those days where we feel connected to a community of booksellers. The name ‘independent bookstore’ has an independent right in it. There can be a kind of solitary quality to it, that we’re our own unique thing. This is a reminder that we’re part of a whole network of like-minded people who are all doing their own unique thing in their neighborhoods,” Crossley said.

Bookstores encourage fostering community spaces outside of Independent Bookstore Day. Elliot Bay Book Company, Arundel Books, Madison Books and Secret Garden Books all have a page for events on their websites. In an email statement to The Spectator, Emma Nichols, one of the managers at Elliot Bay Book Company, spoke to community engagement.

“We offer books, yes, but we also offer connections—whether through our many events or through the serendipity of browsing our shelves. If you’re looking to buy your next favorite read there’s no better place than an indie bookstore, where recommending books is one of our favorite things to do,” Nichols said.

Although independent bookstore day may not have its previous attendance and feeling of scurried adventure, it offers a great safe alternative and supports local businesses in the process. Maybe by this time next year, the event will be back in full.